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# GOD AS PURE POSSIBILITY AND THE WONDER OF POSSIBILISATION

## ABSTRACT

How do we deal with the issue of permanence in time (Augustine), when we simultaneously experience the limits of our capacity to possibilise the future? The article addresses these questions in terms of the coordinates of the concepts of contingency, the priority of possibility, and free will. It is necessary to rethink theological concepts within these coordinates that are considered characteristic for the self-understanding of modern people. The article describes the development of subjectivity as natality, being capable, and being seen. The aim of this development is to be able to create new beginnings that make the good life with, and for others possible, and give permanence in time. What do we need to think and presume to be vital, for the wonder of possibilisation to emerge? God is imagined as the silent power of the possible (“Can” itself) that keeps in reserve the wonder of possibilisation (“You can”).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What does coming into existence in a life characterised by contingency and (im)possibility mean?

Becoming a subject is an existential question focused on the future that presents itself as an (im)possibility of, or in the life of a subject,

a community and society. Is there a place for me, my family and my community in this world? What will be the quality of that future? Can it be a better place for me and for others? A more humane world? Can my actions contribute to the coming of a better world for myself with, and for others? Will I be capable and take responsibility? Will God help me in making me capable and willing to take responsibility and to act?

I have addressed these questions previously as part of the need to rethink theology from the concepts of contingency, the priority of possibility and free will that characterise human understanding of the self. There is a need to rethink our theological concepts within the coordinates of the concepts of contingency, the priority of possibility and free will.<sup>1</sup>

In a previous article (Hermans 2012), I formulated the task of leadership in the church to prioritise the possible, and connected this with the need for transformation of the forms of social life in which people live (specifically in South Africa). I also referred to the connection between God as power of possibility and, what I call, the wonder of possibilisation. In this article, I will resume this connection, but deepen it, by taking up the issue of free will and contingency that was lacking in the previous article.

In another article (Hermans 2017), I described the perplexity of the connection between God, who “infuses human beings with love”, and the freedom of having the will to love. What is the love that God works within us, without us? I described “free will” as what emerges in the event that our will to love is set free by God. I formulated this idea on the basis of a phenomenology of love and the hermeneutics of events. In this article, I will expand this idea beyond a phenomenology of love to the idea of becoming a human subject. Fundamentally, I will argue that this perplexity disappears when God is imagined as the power of the possible that keeps in reserve the wonder of the possibilisation of human subjects.

I start with a story that I heard, of a young girl in a congregation; I will call her Lisa. I will refer to this story in this article so that the reader can connect my conceptual argument to the life of a young subject “becoming a subject”. In section 3, I will formulate a core existential question for human beings: Will there be a future of a good life with, and for others? Subjectivity refers to a dynamic process of transformation in interaction with the life that is lived. It is not the factual (necessity, predictability) that has priority, but the possibility of the child. I will show that becoming a

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1 See some recent work in Catholic theology in Germany: Wintzek (2017); Ruhstorfer (2018); Rosenhauer (2018). For a more programmatic perspective on theology and contingency, see my article on “Theology in an age of contingency” (Hermans 2019, 7-30).

subject is based on two principles, namely the rejection of essentialisation (or non-identity) and contingency.

In section 4, I will show that a subject is someone “who speaks” and “who acts”. In other words, the subject is the author of speaking and acting in the social space with, and for others. Every speech and action presuppose the alterity of others. The “who” can be traced through the capacities that a person attributes to him-/herself, and that others attribute to him/her. I call this the person’s “character”. “Being yourself” and “character” form a unity. Becoming a person is transformation. The “character” of a person can change, and yet a person can still be “him-/herself”.

I will describe the development of subjectivity as natality, being capable, and being seen. These capacities are important in light of the existential question of permanence in time. I will pay attention to our capacities for speaking and acting, telling, remembering and promising, attributing accountability, forgiveness and hope. The first capacities in this list are morally neutral; the later ones have a strong moral quality, that is living a good life with, and for others, in just institutions and a sustainable society (see section 5).

Do human subjects succeed in making new beginnings, to give a future (permanence in time) to the good life with, and for others? (See section 6.) Sometimes they do, and sometimes they do not. The capacities that should give continuity are limited by the failure and the unwillingness of an agent as well as by the plurality of actions in the social space that give human subjects no control over the outcomes of their acting and speaking.

How does the wonder of possibilisation emerge? What do we need to think and presume to be vital for this wonder to emerge? What do we think should do justice to the human conditions for subjectification, namely contingency, free will and the priority of the possibility. I will follow theological scholars, who use the imagination of Nicholas of Cusa in calling God “*Possest*” (possibility as actuality) and “*Posse ipsum*” (the power of possible). God is imagined as the silent power of the possible (“Can” itself) that keeps in reserve the wonder of possibilisation (“You can”) – a reserve that holds a surplus of human fullness (see section 7).

In section 7, I will summarise three aspects in which the divine power of the possible discloses itself, namely in, and through the developmental process of subjectivation, natality (the event of new beginnings), and exercising free will.

## 2. THE STORY OF LISA

Lisa is in her final year of secondary education. She is the typical sixteen-year-old girl who lives in your street, with a body that does not quite fit yet, braces, and a pair of shining eyes. When people talk about Lisa, they always say that she is such a nice person who seems to get along with everybody.

A few months ago, I saw her sitting in the church hall after a Sunday celebration. I asked how she was doing. More precisely, I asked her: "Did you experience anything last week that gave you a big smile on your face? One of those smiles that stays with you the whole day, that you can't wipe off your face?"

She gave an answer without much thought. "Yes", she said, "I had a meeting with my mentor some days ago. You know her – Mrs Botha. You know, I've already decided what I want to study after matric: philosophy." We did not talk much about that. But then she said something to me that really touched me: "Lisa, I see something in you. You're a very sociable girl!" Lisa continued: "I see this in the way I interact with other students in the classroom. But also outside school."

This conversation remained in my mind for some time, I remember, because I am proud of subjects such as Mrs Botha, who see possibilities in other subjects – notably, young people who need guidance. Recently, I saw Lisa again, sitting alone in the corridor. I was curious how she had been since our conversation a few months earlier. Lisa said that she had been more conscious of her social talent since that conversation with Mrs Botha. She had signed up for the group who prepared the summer camp for the 15+-year-olds of the church. When she mentioned this, her eyes glowed.

I asked her: "How are you now?" She answered: "I've learned something. You know, there are always kids who you think you have nothing to do with. There are a few girls here in church of my age who I'd never actually spoken to. I thought they were "weird", and my friends thought so, too. During our trip, I deliberately came into contact with them. And you know, they're actually girls like me and my girlfriends! I suddenly saw this. And I also brought my friends into contact with them."

Now I was that subject with a big smile on his face. Proud of Lisa, proud of Mrs Botha, and proud of everyone I had met in that school. Could this be the intention of good teaching?

### 3. SUBJECTIVITY AS AN EXISTENTIAL QUESTION OF PERMANENCE IN TIME

What is at stake when one comes to existence as a subject? Nothing less than whether or not one has the possibility of a future that is living a good life with, and for others. This is an existential question: Is there a place for me in this world? How should I live, and will this life last? Am I going to lose myself? Or my connection with others? Can my words and actions influence the coming of new possibilities? Will other people give me the possibility of a good life as my future?

Mrs Botha “saw” the possibility of a social talent in Lisa.<sup>2</sup> The “seeing” found a resonance in Lisa in such a way that she still glowed when she told about it months later.<sup>3</sup> This is a resonance between the subjectivity of Mrs Botha and the subjectivity of Lisa, and this subjectivity is focused on what gives a future to human subjects living with, and for others. What touched Lisa in the conversation with Mrs Botha was a future that was at her feet as a possibility of life, in a way that was fulfilling and inexhaustible.

I will now explain that becoming a subject implies opening up the future that emerges as the actuality of a subject. I will first define subjectivity and elaborate on two characteristics, namely non-identity and contingency.

Subjectivity is a dynamic process, in which the situation – in the broadest sense of the word – in which a life is lived, changes that life. Subjectivity refers to the dynamic of the transformation of the life that Lisa leads. Suppose Mrs Botha had assumed that Lisa could not change; then, she would not have “seen” Lisa from the perspective of possibility. But she did, and so she points to the possibility of a social talent that wants to become actual in Lisa’s life. Her “seeing” resonated in Lisa and transformed her. Lisa then started to see herself in the same way and began to act on the basis of this possibility.

People change through interaction with the life they live. Lisa is at the point when she must go into life. In the broadest sense of the word, that means gaining experience, overcoming resistance, experiencing disappointment, experiencing success, commitment to others, and learning

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- 2 In this article, I will frame possibilisation as a ‘possible of/or in subject x’. I borrow this phrase from my colleague Maaïke de Haardt (2018), who wants to connect the possible intrinsically to human subjects. It wants to emerge as the future of, or in human subjects.
- 3 ‘Resonanz’ is defined as a type of relationship between the self and the world, in which the world reveals itself, and the subject responds empathetically (Rosa 2018: 25-26).

from other people. The lived life is an opportunity that changes life. Through this process, Lisa will become a subject. That is the reason why becoming a subject is about a life that has changed, and a subject that is transformed.

Two assumptions or principles of subjectivity create open space for new possibilities, namely non-identity and contingency (Delahaye 2018:234-236). Delahaye describes how three philosophers – Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben – rethink the subject through their interpretation of the letters of Paul. These authors are extremely interested in reading Paul, because

Paul's letters show a way of thinking which is radically opposed to all forms of identity politics and exclusionary thinking. This can be seen in texts such as 1 Corinthians 1:17-29 and Galatians 3:28 (Delahaye 2018:14).

I share this motive (opposition to all forms of identity politics and exclusionary thinking) as a lens through which to study becoming a subject in the social space of society.

### 3.1 Non-identity

Pauline subjectivity entails a transformation of subjectivity. It is a coming into existence as a subject through what has happened.

Non-identity denotes the fact that Pauline subjectivity is not an identity marker that is applied to a subject. Rather, the transformation in subjectivity revokes every identity. Pauline subjectivity always eludes every attempt to be solidified in a static identity (Delahaye 2018:22).

Non-identity implies the rejection of any form of essentialisation of human subjects. Galatians 2:19-20 shows what is at stake for these philosophers in reading Paul:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (NRSV).

Christ's arrival changed life definitively, and this change was a change internal to life. Delahaye's (2018:19) analysis of the philosophers' reading of Paul is

that the emphasis of life is not shifted away towards a different life in a different world ... but on a transformation of subjectivity. The premise of non-identity implies rejecting any essentialisation of being a subject.<sup>4</sup>

Essentialisation means that a subject coincides with the fact that certain characteristics or facts are given. Facts can relate to all aspects of the identity of a subject: from ethnicity, gender, knowledge and performance, to social environment and having a certain (non-)religious identity. The principle of non-identity implies a priority of possibility over (f)actuality. This does not mean that facts such as the political order in society, the national and global economic order, the social-cultural order of majority and minority groups, ethnicity, masculinity and femininity are denied. The premise that gives priority to possibility over factuality implies suspending the grip that facts have on subjectivity in favour of the possibility of subjectivity. The facts cannot be ignored, but as human beings we do not coincide with factuality. This implies that becoming a subject is not ultimately and completely determined by “the past”. Subjectivity cannot be reduced to the “given” conditions: possibility takes precedence over (f)actuality.

### 3.2 Contingency

The second assumption that underlies becoming a subject is contingency. Contingency refers to the sense of unpredictability and uncertainty in becoming a subject. It refers to the moment when a possibility appears in reality, and the essence of this appearance is that it is unexpected, by definition new and different to what we had thought. We could describe contingency as “[w]hat is not, from the possibility to be what is, from the possibility not to be” (Heiden 2014:260).

Contingency is a marker of our human condition (ontology). We experience things that happen in our life as contingent: unexpectedly, “what is” (a relationship, a healthy body, harmony with nature, a job) is no longer there, and “what is not” unexpectedly appears as a possibility (a relationship, a healthy body, and so on). Contingency is not “in the facts”, but “in the becoming subject”, where people experience no future or the loss of future, or the unexpected opening of future. An experience of contingency is subjective. The same fact can be interpreted as contingent

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4 The aspect of non-identity impacts not only on subjectivity, but also on the concepts of community and world. “Non-identity entails no longer taking on the shape of the world. It means no longer necessarily conforming to what the world expects. Non-identity is related to community in that identity can no longer serve as the basis for community,” (Delahaye 2018:22). However, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

by one subject, and as not by another. It is about the experience of change in subjectivity, about not having the opportunity to change, to change unexpectedly, to change for the better, but also for the worse.

Delahaye identifies 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 as the programmatic text that helps us understand Pauline subjectivity. It explains how the change in subjectivity, mentioned by Paul, has been effected by the arrival of Christ. Christ came, and changed the conditions of possibility for life.

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away (NRSV).

According to Delahaye (2018:24), contingency is intimately related to the concept of temporality:

Pauline temporality means living life towards the end of time which will come at an undetermined moment in the future. This effects a radical contingency in life, because it wrestles control away from it. Pauline subjectivity denies necessity and accepts insecurity, in view of the wonder of possibilisation.

For Lisa, the words spoken by Mrs Botha were an experience of contingency. First, Lisa “unchains” herself from the necessity to be the way she “sees” herself and others “see” her. Contingency implies the acceptance of non-necessity: “What is” has the possibility that “it is not”. “What is not” has the possibility “to be”. Possibility assumes non-necessity. If everything is necessary, then there is no possibility of change, and no coming of subjectivity. Lisa accepted that she is not necessarily who she “sees” herself to be. Secondly, Lisa accepts the insecurity of living according to the possibility of her social talent “as if” this has already come into existence. She acts on the basis of this new possibility at the summer camp “as if” she is actually a talented social subject living the good life with, and for others.

#### 4. SUBJECT AS “SELF” AND “CHARACTER”

What do we mean when we refer to Lisa as a subject? Subjectivation is the dynamic process of transformation in interacting with life as it is lived, leading to changes in life. In what follows, I want to clarify that a subject refers to one

“who acts” and “who speaks”. The “who” is an expression of “Lisa herself”: unique, resourceful, not interchangeable with any other. At the same time, Lisa is seen in “what she does” and “what she says”. We can call this Lisa’s “character” (Dupont 2010). Subjectivity is about that difficult-to-grasp self (“who speaks” and “who acts”). This subjectivity has a practical relationship with the world. To become a subject, Lisa must express herself in words and actions. The “self” cannot exist without support from the “character”. At the same time, however, the self cannot be reduced to the actuality of the words and actions by which she expresses herself.<sup>5</sup>

A subject must act to discover who s/he is. One cannot experience this “who” without acting and speaking. Acting makes the discovery of oneself possible, because the “who” unfolds in, and through acting and speaking. Lisa presents herself in her acting and speaking. At the same time, her subjectivity “escapes” this actuality in which she manifests herself. Who she is, we can only hear from Lisa herself.

But did Mrs Botha not “see” something as a possibility emerging in Lisa, namely her social talent? Yes, but only Lisa can reveal whether this is a part of her “self”. Becoming a person means that Lisa takes responsibility for her speaking and acting, and attests that “this is me!”.<sup>6</sup> Mrs Botha runs the risk that her “seeing” does not resonate in Lisa. There is no subjectification without the freedom for a person to express whether this is part of his/her “self” or not. It is only in freedom that a subject can attest “who” s/he is. Why? The presumption of “selfhood” is that a subject uniquely expresses the “self” of Lisa. “Unique” does not mean that others cannot make the same choices in terms of the “what we choose”; the social talent that manifests itself in Lisa is a human capacity that can be recognised in other people. It expresses the “self” of Lisa, and she has the freedom to transform (that is, become a subject).

What then do we mean by “freedom”? Freedom can be defined as freedom of choice. This is probably the common-sense idea of freedom,<sup>7</sup>

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5 The argument of this article is in the tradition of the philosophical anthropology of Hannah Arendt and Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1986; 2005; 2009). Ricoeur (2005) calls his approach “a phenomenology of a capable man”.

6 Ricoeur expresses this in the words “voici moi!” (‘Here I am!’). This is also the last thing a person can say to another person. Beyond speech and actions. “Here I am! See me!” This is also what the mentor thinks when she sees Lisa as a sociable girl.

7 “The trouble has always been that free will – whether understood as freedom of choice or as the freedom to start something unpredictably new – seems utterly incompatible” (Arendt 1978:32). This freedom is identified with consumerism, individualism, “do as you please”, and so on.

and presupposes that there are options given (A, B, C, and so on) between which one can choose. To a certain degree, a subject should be free in order to make the choice an expression of his/her “self”. Is this the freedom that Lisa expresses? No. What happened in the story is that Lisa recognised a possibility in herself; that is, a subject with a social talent towards others. This is not the freedom to choose between A or B, but a freedom to transform, so that her subjectivity can come into existence.

This kind of freedom is laid bare by the principles of non-identity and contingency. When we essentialise people or deny contingency, we deny their freedom to transform. In the story, this freedom also manifested itself in Lisa’s actions towards other girls in the youth camp who were considered “different”, such that she and her friends could not relate to them. The initiative to connect with them – and, in this process, to include her friends<sup>8</sup> – is also an expression of the freedom to transform. She has “chosen” to be someone who acts inclusively towards others.

## 5. NATALITY AND BECOMING CAPABLE<sup>9</sup>

A subject is known by the capacities that s/he attributes to him-/herself, such as “social acting” in the case of Lisa, and “the recourse we make to others to give that personal certainty a social status” (Ricoeur 2005:1). To be capable and to be recognised by others are both characteristics required in the dynamic process of becoming a subject. Capacities are used to make new beginnings, to create possibilities that become actual. The philosopher Hannah Arendt uses the term “natality” for this. Ricoeur (2005:1) uses the combination “becoming capable, being recognised”. Both place subjectivity in a social space, which Arendt (1998) calls the social space of appearance.

### 5.1 Natality

The very capacity for beginning is rooted in *natality*, and by no means in creativity, not in a gift, but in the fact that human beings, new men, again and again appear in the world by virtue of birth. (Arendt 1978:217).

A subject is someone who starts speaking and acting, and by doing so is “installed” as a subject. Arendt derives this idea from Augustine: Man

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8 Arendt calls this “acting in concert”. I like to stress this, because subjects exist in a social space with others.

9 This title is derived from the article by Ricoeur (2005).

knows that he has a beginning and that he will have an end. Because man knows that he is temporal and not eternal, the primary question of man is the possibility of existing in the future.

With man, created in God's image, a being came into the world that, because it was a beginning running toward an end, could be endowed with the capacity of willing and nilling (Arendt 1978:110).

In order to have a future, a beginning must exist for something that was not there previously. Subjectivity exists in this power of beginning something new, which creates something that was not there at one time.<sup>10</sup> The human will is involved in this future orientation of mankind. The "I can" shows itself in the will to act and to speak. Does a person show this power of a new beginning and act and speak to start something new, or is this will absent? Subjectivity is both willing and nilling, as conditioned by human contingency.

Mrs Botha's words evoke in Lisa the will to transform. Natality expresses itself when a subject says "I can". This is what happens in the story of Lisa. She takes the initiative to make contact with the girls who had been excluded from her friendship. In taking this initiative, it becomes clear "who" Lisa is, namely a person who has an eye for the other and gives future to the other in the community by relating to the other. Lisa also takes the initiative to include her friends in this movement. In this acting and speaking, she becomes a subject who has the freedom and the capability to take the initiative towards other people and give them a future in the community.

I want to highlight two matters, given that natality is at the heart of Arendt's political theory. First, it is important not to see natality as separate from freedom and responsibility for the future of life with, and for other people. Subjectivity is constituted by the power to act and to speak; if one robs people of this power, they lose their subjectivity. This power cannot be taken away, because it has the potential to exist. But, due to contingency, it is not necessarily or always present. Only through the power of new beginnings (that is, the wonder of possibilisation) does subjectivity emerge as a dynamic process of coming into existence.

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10 This is something essentially different from free will (see above). "The liberum arbitrium decides between things equally possible and given to us, as it were, in statu nascendi as mere potentialities, whereas a power to start something really new could not very well be preceded by some potentiality, which then would figure as one of the causes of the accomplished act" (Arendt 1978:29). "Because the new beginnings have no causal ground which explains that they must be, Arendt considers them as wonders (or miracles) which save the world from coming to an end, e.g. having no future" (Arendt 1998:247).

Secondly, the idea of persons living together *eo ipso* implies concerted action. According to Arendt (1998:198), the political realm (or *polis*) is “the organisation of people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between living together for this purpose”. This “space of appearance” – as Arendt calls it – is realised when different people come together and can act and speak in freedom. Hence, the space of appearance is marked by freedom and plurality. Plurality means that people with different opinions, feelings, longings and dreams are able to act together and speak with each other. As social beings, we need others to realise the aim of living a good life with, and for others. Others also have a negative effect on our possibility of being effective in realising a future with, and for others.

## 5.2 Becoming capable

What capacities am I talking about? In the preceding section, I referred to the basic capacities of speaking and acting. Other capacities include telling, remembering, making a promise, blaming oneself, forgiving and hoping. The character of these capacities is different. The first capacities are more or less morally neutral; the last clearly express a moral quality (Ricoeur 2005:2).

Speaking is a capacity that enables others to interpret what I do as meaningful. Our acts can have different meanings, and there are no acts without meaning.<sup>11</sup> In this capacity to speak and act, the “who” appears as the subject of speaking and acting.

The next capacity is “telling a story”. The story brings unity in the multitude of actions and statements. Life is full of events that happen to us, and actions that we perform. We undergo life (passively) and shape life (actively). To a certain degree, the story has the power to create order and coherence in this multiplicity and heterogeneity of speaking and acting, so that we gain insight into the “who” but only to a certain degree, because this multiplicity and this heterogeneity do not disappear (due to the contingency of human acting and speaking). Stories have the power to bring unity (concordance) to a multitude of actions (discordance). A story can be viewed as a creative imitation of speaking and acting. “A creative imitation”, because in the “plot” of the story, unity (concordance) is predominant over heterogeneity (discordance), while heterogeneity predominates in lived life.

A story is the imagining of a possible unity within the heterogeneity: “You are a social girl”, Mrs Botha says, and many others after her. The story does

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11 This is the difference between acts and behaviour.

not create history (facts), but it refers to history. The story does not make meaning; it reveals meaning that shows itself. The story and the action do not belong to the category of making (or the manufacturability), but to the category of the event. The story expresses what in each beginning of living with, and for others shows itself as a possibility or potentiality of, or in persons.

The transition from acting to story makes remembrance possible; it opens up the possibility of promise (being true to who you are as a person). For this reason, Lisa can remember what she did at the youth camp, and she can recount her acting and speaking. This memory gives sustainability to herself as a social subject. In these stories, she lives on in the memory of the other girls who went with her on the camp – and in my memory of her.

In the capacity of the promise, she can give “permanence” to herself: “If you meet me next time, I will (still) be a sociable person.” By recounting the meaning of my actions, imputability, memory and promise emerge as possible capacities. These capacities are important for the future of every subject and of the community as a whole (*polis*), because the future requires durability, sustainability, and continuity.

The capacity of imputability is a moral quality. The person ascribes responsibility to him-/herself as the author (willing) of an act that has helped the other or caused harm to him/her. This also applies to *not* acting in favour of the future of others in a community or society. The subject bears the consequences of acting or not acting “as far as” and “to the extent to which” s/he can be seen as the agent of these consequences. Lisa acted in favour of the girls who were excluded from the group of youngsters at the youth camp. Actions such as, in the modern world of social media, having no “likes”, public bullying (with no possibility of restoration), and sexting make the future impossible for others in the social space in which they live.

The subject also has the capacity to admit guilt, to be able to forgive him-/herself, and to be forgiven by the other. Due to the seriousness of an action, the subject no longer has a place in the social space in which s/he lives, and therefore has no future. Forgiveness is needed for the restoration of a future that has been seriously affected (if not blocked completely) by the child’s actions.

Finally, the capacity of hope relates to situations of living in unfavourable conditions, where there is hardly any to no expectation of a future. Hope is to see a (new) possibility of becoming a person, and not to give up looking forward to the coming of this possibility. In the social domain of money, there are limits to living on credit. In the domain of subjectivation, there

are no limits to the credit one can give to every person. When possibility has priority, hope refers to the coming of (new) possibility for oneself and others, within the social space of a good life with, and for each other.

## 6. LIMITS IN POSSIBILISATION

Can a person succeed in giving new beginnings in the social space of appearance, and thereby escape oblivion? Will the wonder of possibilisation emerge? Yes – and no. Subjectivity is characterised by fragility, brokenness, and vulnerability, which can prevent new beginnings. The fragility and brokenness that characterise human existence are ultimately the price man must pay for the principles of non-identity and contingency. For this reason, we are subjects with free will and live in a social space characterised by plurality. Subjects can take the initiative to speak and act, and they can undergo (passively) the acting and speaking of others. Our actions do not escape the plurality of the contradictory actions of others, and contradictory views on the good life with, and for others.

There is no “wonder of possibilisation”, no beginnings that give permanence to a life with, and for others. The capacities of speaking and acting, memory, forgiveness, promise, and hope are not used to save human life with, and for others from the ruin of oblivion and destruction.

- We do not cry out our outrage or act when we see other people who are victims of injustice in society. We see people suffering, but our heart is not touched by it. We turn our heads away. We say that we cannot change the fate of others, turn our heads, and go on living.
- Memory keeps alive what should not be forgotten, such as the victims of war, slavery and genocide. Our memory can keep alive the impatience of the hope which the victims of oppression have experienced and died for. But if we forget, the victims fall into oblivion.
- Sometimes it feels impossible to forgive the evil done by an offender. The harm done to a person or to a community may affect people so deeply that it is impossible for them to forgive the other(s). This inability to forgive denies the other a future in the community. If there is no reconciliation, the other has no future in the social space (*polis*).<sup>12</sup>

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12 “Most South Africans feel that reconciliation is still needed, and that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) provided a good foundation for reconciliation in the country. However, just over half the population feel that progress in terms of reconciliation has been made, while less than half of South Africans report having experienced reconciliation themselves. Six in ten South Africans, furthermore, feel that reconciliation – most commonly associated with forgiveness, moving on

- A person is known for his/her social commitment, such as commitment to homeless people or refugees. However, something may happen which makes it hard to keep one's promise. For example, the person may experience deep suffering from an incurable disease at a young age.
- The hope for a future may be lost. Suffering can be too heavy for people to bear, or last for too long to keep hope alive. People may no longer expect happiness to come their way.

## 7. THE WONDER OF POSSIBILISATION

Life is a risk, in the sense that the transforming event of possibilisation may not happen, and that people (individuals or communities) may experience no future. Life is also a wonder of new beginnings, in which human fullness emerges, a surplus of the good life, ultimate happiness.

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'material' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. (Arendt 1958:247).

Ricoeur (1983:72) follows Arendt in the idea that only "natality" (disruption; the unexpected; the event) of emerging new beginning(s) can escape the illusion of immortality on the part of mortals who think eternity.

The question is: What makes new beginnings emerge as human subjects? The theological answer must cohere with the frame, discussed earlier, of the dynamic process of subjectivation within the ambit of the relationship of human subjects to God. That is, it must do justice to the contingency and freedom (free will) of human beings within their relationship to God. It must prioritise possibility above actuality in human subjects in their relationship to God.

Our theological concepts should not be incomprehensible and meaningless within the formulated framework of becoming subjects in the coordinates of contingency, freedom and the priority of possibility above actuality. Two positions should be excluded: "The grace of God releases man from autonomy or we should act as human beings, *etsi Deus non daretur*." (Wintzek 2017:27). These positions are two sides of the same coin: The inability to think human subjectification "*coram Deo*" on the basis of contingency and freedom, and the priority of possibility above actuality.

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and peace – cannot fully take its course while those who were oppressed under apartheid remain poor" (Potgieter 2017:17).

I will focus on those authors who are in dialogue with the ideas of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), who coined two new names for God, namely “*Possest*” (“Can is”, or the actuality of possibility) and “*Posse ipsum*” (“Can itself”, or pure possibility). Cusanus is considered one of the first philosophers/theologians to break with the Greek philosophy (notably from Aristotle) that prioritises actuality above possibility.

If one grants that actuality is prior in being to potentiality, and that primary being or form is actual, then the sequence of acts in time precede one another up to the eternal prime mover. (Casarella 1990:14).

In God (the first mover), there is only actuality and no potentiality, because God is eternal and there is no point at which he cannot be. Human beings can perish and have the potential to be or not to be. Cusanus’ new imagination of God as “*Possest*” and “*Posse ipsum*” breaks with this model of giving priority to actuality.

It is not only the originality of his re-imagination of God that makes Nicholas of Cusa so interesting, but also the fact that this imagination is “necessary for thinking” and “vital for living”, in view of the dynamic of transformation of the human subject. Cusanus uses a transcendental logic to think of the new names of God as conditions for the human condition of being a free and contingent being. To think “God as power of possibility” is a necessary condition for understanding human freedom.<sup>13</sup>

According to transcendental logic, the event of a new beginning must presume human freedom, which in a formal sense must be absolute. Anything else would not do justice to the self-evidence of human freedom (Wintzek 2017:27, my translation).

But God as power of possibility is also “vital for living” in praxis of the dynamic of transformation as subject. “Vitality” refers to the practical conditions for the possibility of new beginnings. The dynamic of subjectivation is rooted in “natality”, which presumes that human subjects in the social space of appearance are the source of new beginnings that give future to the good life with, and for others.

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13 A transcendental logic avoids the problem of compatibilism, which combines free will and determinism. Contingency (as the possibility that it could also be different) is difficult to combine with determinism by an external power – for example, an all-determining providence. For an elaborate discussion, see Wintzek (2017).

Because Christianity is at its root not theory, but practice; since the Christian faith is not only a source of thought, but a creative will; because a subject in the Christian universe is not seen merely as a finite defect, but as a full, creaturely reality (Wintzek 2017:21, my translation)

I will now discuss Cusanus' re-imaginings of God; first to *Possest* (possibility as actuality), and then to *Posse* (pure possibility). How do these imaginings substantiate the event of a wonder of possibilisation (the freedom to begin new beginnings)?<sup>14</sup> According to Cusa, God is everything he is-able-to-be (*posse est*). God alone is all he can be; human beings are not, because only in the beginning are possibility and actuality identical. Absolute possibility is neither prior nor posterior to actuality, but is in God, possibility, actuality, and their connection (*nexus*) are eternally identical.

Cusanus expresses this in a new name for God: *Possest*, or "possibility-as-actuality", "Can is") (Flasch 1998:523). For Cusanus, *Possest* indicates a total coincidence of possibility and actuality (being), and this coincidence is prior to any unfolding. In the fullness of being, actuality enfolds possibility. In the doctrine of coincidence of opposites (actuality and possibility), Cusanus is able to think of God as pure freedom. This identity of absolute being prior to all differentiation is called *complicatio* (enfolding). By contrast, *explicatio* (unfolding) refers to the differentiation of this identity of absolute being in the relation to identity and difference. God and creatures are related, as *complicatio* is to *explicatio*, as pure unity to the manifestation of that unity into multiplicity:

- The difference between actuality and possibility in human beings (unfolding) is grounded in the "actuality-of-possibility" (enfolding), and
- The pure unity between possibility and actuality is prior to the distinction between possibility and actuality in human beings.

All beings are enfolded in God, and God unfolds into the possibilisation of human beings. As can be seen in a young woman who sees the possibility of being social; the development of a child, or the growth of a tree. Cusanus uses the example of the sun:

In the sun, Nicholas reminds us, God is the essence of the sun.  
God is in each distinct composition of possibility and actuality as

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14 I will avoid a detailed technical analysis of Nicholas of Cusa's images of God. I will simply indicate that, in line with his new images of God, one can understand the wonder of possibility-in-actuality in relation to God as "necessary for thinking" and "vital for living". Many excellent articles and books provide a more detailed analysis of *Possest* and *Posse* (Kearney 2001; Flasch 1998; Bond 1997; Cassarella 1990; Hollingsworth 2016; Wintzek 2017).

the possibility of its actual existence. God grounds existence as the condition for their actual possibility. Without God, without the enfolding of all possibilities in God, nothing actually exists and nothing can exist (Casarella 1990:24).

At the end of his life, Cusanus does not think of possibility with regard to its possible actualisation. The new images for God are *Posse* (possibility) or *Posse ipsum* (pure possibility, or power of the possible). In this re-imagination of God, Cusanus prioritises possibility before actuality. It does not add anything to possibility to state that it is also actualised. *Posse* (pure “Can” without “Is”) as the grounds for all possibility is different from the possibility for this or for that. I will interpret this idea of “*Posse*” from Heidegger’s perspective in his understanding of the “quiet power of the possible”.<sup>15</sup>

When I speak of the ‘quiet power of the possible’: I do not mean the possible of a merely represented *possibilitas*, nor the *potentia* as *essentia* of an *actus* of the *existentia*, but Being itself, which in its loving potency possibilises thought and thus also the essence of man, which means in turn his relationship to Being. To possibilise something is to sustain it in its essence, to retain it in its element (Casarella 1990:34).

Heidegger presumes an empathic relationship between the power of the possible (being) and the wonder of possibilisation in human beings. In being, possibilising and loving coincide. In the words of Heidegger: “Being possibilises (*vermag*) through love (*das moegende Vermoegen*).” (Casarella 1990:34). This “possibilisation” (or pure possibility) is the authentic possible, whose essence exits in loving (German: *Das Vermögen des Mögens*). “Being” itself possibilises beings out of love for their essence, which is natality, or becoming capable of the wonder of possibilisation. In other words, God (as power of the possible), in an act of love for human subjectivation, makes possible the wonder of possibilisation.

How does this resolve the issue of perplexity described in the introduction, in which love is simultaneously a “gift of God” and an act of free will, to love? Or – formulated in the framework of subjectivation – how can new beginnings be the result of free will (a human subject), and simultaneously be determined by the power to possibilise (God)? God

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15 There is dissensus among scholars regarding to what extent the conceptual framework of Cusanus allowed him to fully grasp the new imagination of God and human subjectivity. I follow authors who deepen this image from the understanding of Heidegger of the “quiet power of possible” in “*Sein und Zeit*” (see Casarella 1990:33-34; Kearney 2001:91-93).

keeps human subjects in their essence, namely to start new beginnings. As the power of the possible, God does not determine a specific actualisation of new beginnings. The new images of God want to evade the problem that the possible needs to be actual; the actualisation is seen to be caused by a higher being (first mover). Thinking of God as pure possibility (*Posse*) solves this perplexity, because God is not the first ground of actualisation but being itself, who wants to keep human subjects in their essence, that is, to start new beginnings. There need not be a cause in order to have a new beginning, because the wonder of possibilisation does not depend on causation. What *is* needed is to presume that this wonder can happen always and everywhere. This is another word for contingency, because what is not has the possibility to be, and what is has the possibility not to be (Van der Heiden 2014: 247). The silent power of the possible (“Can” itself) keeps in reserve the wonder of possibilisation (“You can”); a reserve that holds a surplus of human fullness.

## 8. GOD AS POWER OF THE POSSIBLE, AND BECOMING A SUBJECT

I started with the existential question concerning the future that presents itself as an (im)possibility of, or in the life of a subject, a community, and society. How can Lisa become a subject who creates new beginnings for the good life with, and for others, in just institutions and a sustainable society? How can we think of this becoming a subject as being “possibilised” by God as the power of the possible? I will formulate three aspects of becoming a subject that reflect this connection between God (as power of the possible) and the wonder of possibilisation (Hollingsworth 2016:10-13).

First, God’s power of the possible is made manifest in, and through developmental processes that we understand as the dynamic transformation of becoming a subject. This implies that we understand the transformation of Lisa (as a social subject) in a double way.

Her becoming a subject represents equally the person’s humanisation (viz her embodiment of what she most truly is) and divinisation (viz. her growth towards conformity with God’s Son) (Hollingsworth 2016:10-13).

The second aspect that is closely related to the disclosure of divine *Posse* is natality.<sup>16</sup> Subjectivity manifests itself in new beginnings in acting

16 Hollingsworth (2016:10) uses the concept of creativity connected to the disclosure of divine *Posse*. In line with the theoretical framework, I prefer the term “natality”.

and speaking, to promise and forgive, to hope and to love, to venture new interpretations, to risk new surmises. Such acts of new beginnings are manifestations of the power to create new possibilities (*Posse facere*).

The third aspect is exercising one's free will, a site for (contracted) reflection on infinite divine power and possibility. For Nicholas of Cusa, free will is the part of human beings through which they are particularly closely related to the image of God.

It is particularly the ability to freely choose to expand one's capability for receiving divine grace that reflects the infinite power of God. (Hollingsworth 2016:13).

In the words of Nicholas of Cusa:

O Lord, you have given me being of such kind that it can make itself ever more capable to receive your grace and goodness. And this power (*vis*), which I hold from you and in which I possess a living image of your omnipotent power (*virtus omnipotens*), is free will. By it I can increase or restrict my capacity for your grace.<sup>17</sup>

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17 "Dedisti mihi, domine, esse et id ipsum tale, quod se potest gratiae et bonitatis tuae continue magis capax reddere. Et haec vis, quam a te habeo, in qua virtutis omnipotentiae tuae vivam imaginem teneo, est libera voluntas, per quam possum aut ampliare aut restringere capacitatem gratiae tuae[.]" De vision Dei IV, #11.1-5 (h VI, 15). (Translated by Lawrence Bond [1997]).

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